

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, January 7, 1876, with transcript

Night work Salem, Mass., Jan. 7th., 1876. Dear May

Here I am in Salem comfortably seated at a table all by myself with the intention of drawing up specifications of patent for George Brown.

I say "intention" advisedly for I don't see much chance of my doing anything tonight. My afternoon at the University has been a very hard one—and I am so tired out and nervous that I feel it would be madness in me to goad my mind to any serious work to-night.

I took up my pen a moment ago to begin work—but the first words that appeared upon the paper were those that you see at the head of this letter—"Dear May!" — So you see where my thoughts are wondering to!

My dear little girl I feel as if you are hurt and disappointed that I have seemed anxious—during the past few days—to absent myself from Cambridge. In spite of your protestations to the contrary I feel as if you must think within yourself—deep down within your heart I mean—that if I act so now— I shall soon cease to care very much about you. This thought disturbs me so much that I cannot help continuing the letter that accident has made me begin. I am sorry now that I did not go to your Uncle's house for I feel that it would have rested me to have been near you and yours. So far I am concerned I might as well have been 2 enjoying myself—as be here doing nothing. There is only one consolation however —& that is that I should have been very poor company had I gone— and your uncle may think it fortunate that I did not inflict my presence upon him to-day.

Do you know May dear that I am quite troubled about myself tonight—more troubled than I can well tell you.

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I feel that I have changed so much during the past few months as to be almost another person.

Now that I want to accomplish so much for your sake. Now that I feel the importance of bending all my energies to the preparation of this new telegraphic specification—and doing it now—I am disheartened and almost in despair at my inability to think properly.

You need not flatter yourself that you are the cause of this—(though I admit the disturbing influence)—for you are not .

I feel as if there is something wrong about the mental machinery— my whole methods of thought seem to be disarranged. The faculty that I have always possessed hitherto in a pre-eminent degree seems to have now deserted me— I mean the faculty of concentration—the power of gathering together all the facts that bear upon a certain problem and holding them the facts that bear upon a certain problem and holding them together in close union in the mind—of bringing a subject to a focus. Now the facts themselves escape me, and I have to hunt them up slowly one by one—so that I cannot reason upon them. I can see very clearly the cause of my difficulty although it would be difficult to convince another person that it is so— and I perfectly expect you to hold some different opinion. It is that I have been trying so hard for the past few months to break out of the ruts of my old life— to change those habits that have been crystallizing for years in my existence— and the result has been a general disarrangement—without the formation as yet of new habits to take their place

You must know what obstinate and inextinguishable things habits are. If you once get accustomed to a thing for a long time—it is a violence to your nature to have it suddenly changed. I really think you might keep a dog awake for days by merely preventing him from turning round three times before lying down!

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Let a man get accustomed to drinking or smoking and it is misery to him to give it up. Get into the habit of taking your meals at regular hours—and you become ill if that regularity is disturbed.

But what is true of bodily habits—I think is still more true of mental habits.

The busy professional man whose life is passed with scarce a moment's rest — is miserable whenever he has a holiday. The business man when he retires from active life in the hope of enjoying the remnant of his days in peace— finds all his old habits of life changed—and generally lives for a very short time after his retirement.

I suppose you guess what all this is preface for. I cannot profess to have had any very great regularity in my meals — but I have had some system in any habits of thought. As you know— night has been my time for study and for thought—and I cannot think connectedly until all the little sights and sounds—the thousand and one disturbing influences of the busy day—have gone to rest. Now I have been trying for months past to break up this habit of thinking at night. I have been attempting to do all my work in the day-time. I have been doing violence to my own instincts in the hope of working a reformation—but the result has been that I have been unable to do any serious thinking at all — and now that I want to do it at any cost I can not .

I have made various commencements—at different times during the past three months—upon the specifications that I feel to be so important—but it is no further advanced than it was in October! If I debar myself I can acquire the habit of steady thought at a different period of the day from that to which I have been accustomed—and in the meantime telegraphy and everything else is at a stand-still. I feel that if I am to accomplish anything at telegraphy or anything else just now — I must (however it may disappoint you or distress me) relinquish for the present the attempt to interfere with the normal action of my mind — and allow my thoughts to flow on in their accustomed way. I cannot think in the day-time as I can to night. I feel that my only hope of accomplishing anything in

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telegraphy just now — is to recommence night-work—and leave the eradition of the habit to a time when it is not so important that my mind should be at its brightest and best.

Are you horrified? Are you shocked? Well—I won't begin to-night anyway!

Having eased my mind by this confession of intended change of plan—I intend taking a warm bath and going right off to bed—and I hope I may be in better condition for work—and in better spirits—in the morning. I want to have something to show your father by Sunday evening— but I fear very much that I shall not.

Please do not expect me till Sunday evening . I shall not come near you till then unless I can't help it! And after that I intend to lock myself up—away from everyone—even you—until these specifications are finished. But please don't think I want to keep away from you.

Good night and may you sleep as soundly and as well as I want to do.

Your loving Alec. Miss Mabel Hubbard Brattle St., Cambridge.